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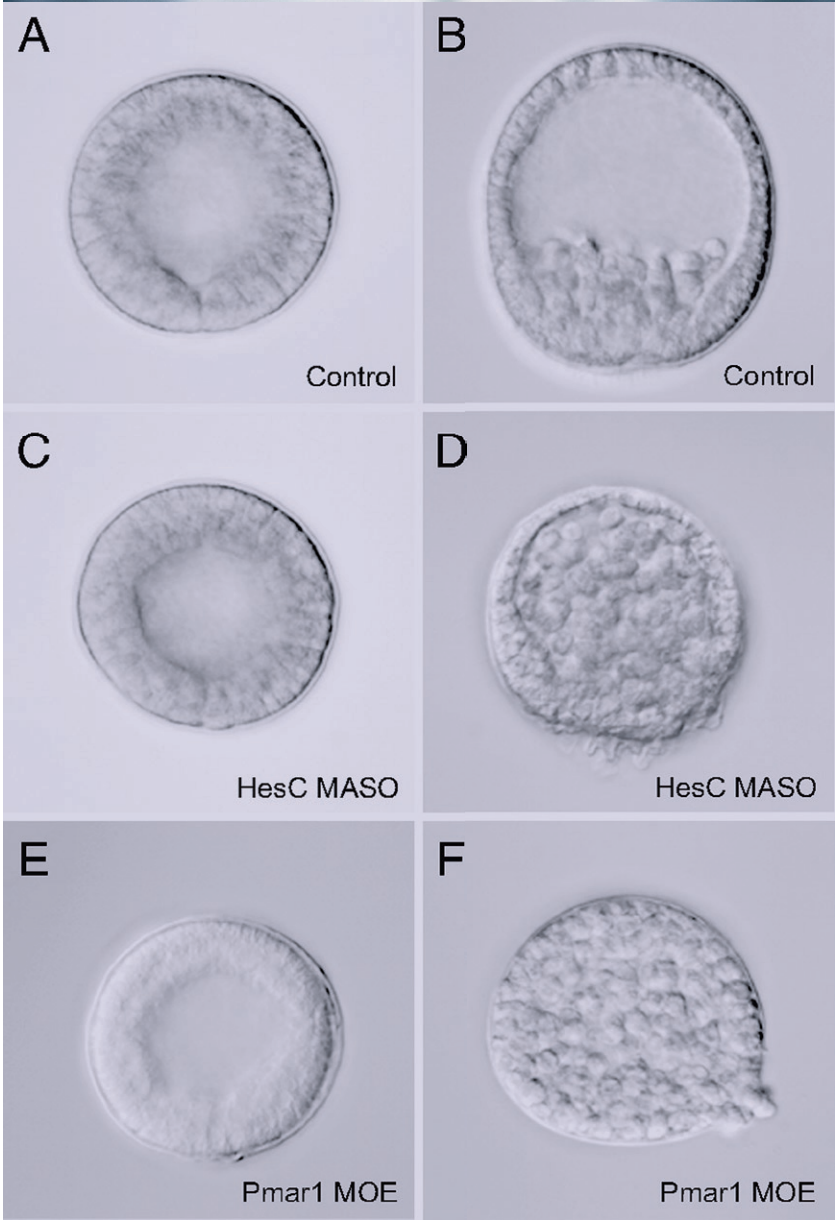
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Life without value? Voices of embryo donors for hESC research in China

Technoscientific projects feature high on the Chinese government’s agenda. The decoding of the rice, chicken and most recently panda genomes have caught the attention of the media and the masses. A no less ambitious plan is the drive to establish China as a key force in human embryonic stem cell (hESC) research. While in the West hESC research has been slowed by ethical and legal debates, a highly permissive regulatory environment has been fostered in China. Achim Rosemann investigates how this corresponds to the perceptions of potential embryo donors.

Achim Rosemann



CHINESE AND OTHER EAST ASIAN political leaders have repeatedly pointed out that religion-based scruples such as those dominating Western debates on using human embryos in research do not exist in their societies (Sleeboom-Faulkner and Patra 2008). In China, to some extent at least, such ideas are reflected also among philosophers and bioethicists. According to Ren-zong Qiu (2007), for example, the Confucian-based view that a person comes into being only at the moment of birth, is still valid. The human embryo, from this perspective, is a betwixt and between entity. It is neither a person, with corresponding moral status, nor is it inanimate matter, without any moral status. For Qiu, therefore, the embryo is best described as a precursory person: a form of human biological life that deserves due respect. At the same time, however, it can be manipulated or destroyed if there is sufficient reason. From the perspective of Qiu and other bioethicists in China, such reason is amply justified by the huge therapeutic potential of hESC research.

A less philosophical explanation for the permissive regulatory approach to hESC research in China has been provided by a number of Western observers, who have linked the widespread support for hESC research to the one-child policy. Cookson (2005), for example, has assumed that as a result of the high number of abortions carried out during the last three decades in the context of the family planning policies, embryonic forms of human life are generally held to be of low value in China. Therefore, a permissive regulatory environment would be easily introduced.

A striking feature that unites these diverging assumptions is that they are formulated in the complete absence of those who are actually confronted with the decision to donate their embryos: women and couples undergoing IVF treatment. What value do these people ascribe to their embryos and what are the culturally mediated assumptions and concerns that impact their decision to refuse or accept donation of their embryos? These are the questions that I shall address here on the basis of data gathered during fieldwork conducted in February and March 2008 in two IVF clinics in South East and Central China, and on a survey carried out at that time among 74 patients of IVF clinics and a control group of 426 students from two universities in Central China. The survey included multiple choice and open-ended questions to which respondents could provide handwritten comments.

Narratives of life, value and death
Research findings indicate that attitudes among embryo donors are much more varied and complex than the three perspectives introduced above suggest. The notion, for example, that ethical scruples regarding the use of human embryos do not exist in China cannot be upheld. Although the overwhelming majority of survey participants regarded hESC research as making meaningful contributions to medicine and science, only 45.7% of all respondents of the survey said they would actually agree to the donation of their embryos for hESC research, while 53.4% indicated that they would refuse to donate (0.9% were undecided).

Among this last group, 52.9% (28.8% of all respondents) rationalised their refusal by supporting the statement that ‘using the embryo is the same as consuming a life’ –an assertion that echoes one of the key complaints against hESC research in Western societies. The issue was qualified in several of the survey respondents’ handwritten comments:

“To donate an embryo to research is equal to killing a life. I think life cannot be destroyed casually”. (Student, Medicine, female, 25)

“It is a moral matter. The embryo is also a life and has its right to live”. (Student, Medicine, male, 21)

An underlying reason for the widespread support of the notion that using an embryo for hESC research is equivalent to terminating a human life might be that the large majority of survey respondents conceive the starting point of the life of a human being to be located in the initial phase of embryogenesis. For instance, in reply to the question ‘When do you think the life of a human being starts?’ 56.8% of all respondents selected the option ‘at the moment of fertilisation’, while another 31.4% opted for ‘when a fertilised egg cell has evolved to an embryo’. Only 6.9% of all respondents envisioned the starting point of the life of a human being to be situated at a later phase during gestation (3.3% opted for ‘the development of the nerve system’ and 3.6% for ‘the development of organs’) and only 3.9% endorsed the view that the life of a human being would start at the moment of birth (1.0% of the total were undecided).

These findings suggest that lines of ethical reasoning that depart from the Confucian idea that a person comes into existence only at the moment of birth do not correspond to the perceptions of the overwhelming majority of potential

embryo donors in China. Accordingly, ethical debates or regulations that are based on this view fall short in accounting for the actual perceptions and needs of the people confronted with the decision to donate their embryos. That perspectives on early forms of human life in China are much more complex than has been commonly suggested is confirmed also by Jing-bao Nie’s (2005) study on the viewpoints of people in China on abortion, which arrives at quite similar conclusions.

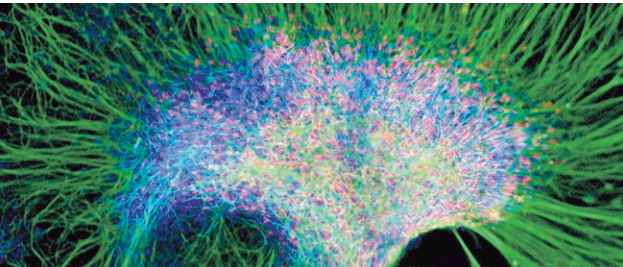
Assessing emotional consequences
A more nuanced assessment of the subjective and embodied perspectives of the women confronted with the request to give away their supernumerary embryos came to the fore also in the responses to survey questions. Thus, 31.4% of all respondents endorsed the statement that they would ‘expect some psychological or emotional difficulties after donation’. And a subgroup of 37.9% of the 293 respondents who had specified that they would refuse to donate their embryos indicated that the underlying reason for their decision was ‘fear of emotional or psychological consequences in case of donation’ (these are 20.2% of all survey respondents). Such fears were reflected also in several of the handwritten comments:

“It [embryo donation] may have consequences for people in a spiritual and psychological sense. Also, it may bring conflicts with morals and ethics”. (Student, Chinese Literature, female, 23)

“It may hurt mentally the person who donates”. (Student, Computer Science, male, 21)

That women are likely to build up a strong emotional bond with their embryos can also be seen from the following excerpt of an interview with an IVF patient. Just before our conversation, the women had heard that she had become pregnant:

“I want to keep these [frozen surplus] embryos for a long time. I really cannot consider giving them away now. Maybe later, when my child is four or five years old... but also then I would not like to give them all away. I still would like to keep some”. (IVF patient, 29)



Discussion
These findings suggest that attitudes and perceptions of the value and of the permissibility to donate and use human embryos for hESC research are much more varied and complex in China than is commonly suggested. The research participants’ responses made clear that Confucian-based ideas on the starting point of human life significantly mismatch with the actual perceptions of potential embryo donors; it also became clear that arguments proclaiming that moral concerns regarding the donation of embryos for research are absent in China cannot be upheld. Equally flawed appears the assumption that due to the high number of abortions carried out in the context of the one-child policy, the value of early forms of human life are generally of low regard among Chinese people. Instead, as the findings of this study suggest, perceptions of embryonic life in China, as elsewhere, are entangled in a rich web of overlapping and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, values, emotions and social relations of which analysts, policy makers, scientists and clinical staff are insufficiently aware.

Achim Rosemann
University of Sussex, UK
ar253@sussex.ac.uk

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